



(U) Living Like a Native in China

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(U//FOUO) Certain SID employees have undergone language and cultural immersion in foreign countries -- training that subsequently proved very valuable in their Agency careers. Here is one such story:

(U) Forsaking trendy girls, school dances, and the mundane routine of high school, I decided to enroll in a study-abroad program and venture out a few thousand miles to spend my junior year in Beijing, China. My interest was sparked by taking Chinese at North Atlanta High School from 1998 to 2000. Although I was hesitant at first, the nine months spent away from home were truly some of the most enriching of my life thus far.

(U) For the first few days, I stayed in a hotel with other students in the program to get acclimated to the city and the time zone before we all met our host families. I was very nervous meeting my host family, but my apprehensions diminished quickly when I found them to be kind and honest people. I lived with a couple who both worked at the Jishuitan Hospital in Beijing; my host mother worked as a pharmacist in the hospital, and my host father ran the oxygen machine for cancer patients. Neither of them spoke English, which forced my Chinese speaking skills to improve exponentially the first few weeks I was there.

(U) Their apartment was a ten minute walk from Tiananmen Square and I spent many weekends walking around the square. I also went a number of times to see the old helmsman Mao Zedong, who is a permanent resident of Tiananmen -- a strange sight indeed! Thousands of people come every day to file through Mao's mausoleum and to place flowers on the statue guarding the entrance of the room where he lies.



(U) A guard walks past a poster of Chairman Mao during an anti-corruption exhibition in Nanjing (Reuters)

(U) Ironically, the flowers must be purchased before going into the mausoleum, and at the end of the day the flowers are picked up and re-sold the next day to visitors. Although Mao is the symbol of idealistic Communism for most, capitalism grossly surrounds his resting place. Although he is not in the best of shape (yellowish-orange tinted skin, decaying nose), the numbers of people who file through his tomb show how much respect he still commands in the present Chinese society.

(U) Every weekend I attended ballet class and traditional Chinese dance class at the Beijing Dance Academy. I found it humorous listening to the instructor pronounce the French phrases with a Chinese accent, and phrases I knew well in ballet often became foreign terms in Chinese-French. The traditional Chinese dance class was quite interesting, too, especially since it consisted of about 25 to 30 sixty-year old Chinese women and me, a 16-year old white girl from America. A year later I went back to the Beijing Dance Academy with the Atlanta Ballet and spent three weeks there doing intensive ballet classes with the Chinese instructors.

(U) The study-abroad program had classrooms in Beijing Middle School No. 2, the school attached to Beijing Normal University. We took four hours of Chinese a day from instructors who taught at the middle school, and we also took math, history, and literature from English-speaking teachers hired by the program. My host family's apartment was quite far from the school, so I rode my bike every morning about 40 minutes from home to school. The ride was very invigorating, though; the mad rushes of morning bike traffic, the smells of bread and fried

dough, and the older citizens doing martial arts along the sidewalks always awakened my senses on the way to school.

(U) Traveling was also a huge part of my time in China. We had barbecue on the Great Wall of China at Badaling; I climbed Taishan and Huangshan (Mount Tai and Yellow Mountain); I traveled to see the Terra Cotta Warriors and the serene gardens of Suzhou. I also spent four days aboard a boat traveling along the Three Gorges of the Yangtze River viewing all the sights that will be flooded in 2010 by the Three Gorges Dam. I traveled by train across the border into Vietnam and stayed in the city of Hanoi for one week. After seeing Mao in Beijing I had to visit Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum too. And just for the record, he looks much better preserved than Mao. I also traveled to other places in China too numerous to mention, but they were all very different and most were very beautiful.

[redacted]

(U) Great Wall of China

(U) Although the travel was great and school was extremely engaging, the most rewarding part of my nine months was living with my host family. Being integrated into a Chinese family taught me more than any travel or sightseeing could do. I ate authentic, home-cooked food every night and talked about politics and society with my host parents. They especially enjoyed talking about the similarities and differences between the culture and politics in the US and China. I heard genuine opinions that weren't merely propaganda rhetoric from the newspapers that fill the streets there. Their way of life and their honest insights gave me a very different angle than any book or article I have ever read.

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(U//FOUO) On a related note, the Stokes Scholarship Program helps Agency-bound college students get immersion language training in foreign countries. See a [recent article](#) on the subject.

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